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CHAPTER I.

The long June day was drawing to its close. Hot and strong the slanting sunbeams beat upon the grimy roofs of the train and threw distorted shadows over the sand and sage brush that stretched to the far horizon. Dense and choking, from beneath the whirring wheels, the dust clouds rose in tawny billows that enveloped the rearmost coaches and, mingling with the black smoke of the "double-header" engines, rolled away in the dreary wake. East and west, north and south, far as the eye could reach, hemmed by low, dun-colored ridges or sharply outlined crests of remote mountain range, in lifeless desolation, the landscape lay outspread to the view. Southward, streaked with white fringe of alkali, the flat monotone of sand and ashes blended with the flatter, flawless surface of a wide-spreading, ash-colored inland lake, its shores dotted at intervals with the bleaching bones of cattle and seamed with ancient wagon tracks unwashed by not so much as a single drop from the cloudless heavens since their first impress on the sinking soil. Here and there along the right of way—a right no human being would care to dispute were the way ten times its width—some drowsing lizards, sprawling in the sunshine along the ties, roused at the sound and tremor of the coming train to squirm off into the sage brush. But no sign of animation had been seen since the crossing of the big divide near Promontory. The long, winding train, made up of mail, express, baggage, emigrant, and smoking cars, "tourists' coaches," and huge sleepers at the rear, with a "diner" midway in the chain, was packed with gasping humanity westward bound for the far Pacific—the long, long, tortuous climb to the snow-capped Sierras ahead, the parched and baking valley of the Great Salt Lake long, dreary miles behind. It was early June of the year '98, and the war with Spain was on.

There had been some delay at Ogden. The trains from the east over the Union Pacific and the Denver & Rio Grande came in crowded, and the resources of the Southern Pacific were suddenly taxed beyond the expectation of its officials. Troops had been whirling westward throughout the week, absorbing much of the rolling stock, and the empty cars were being rushed east again from Oakland Pier; but the nearest were still some hundreds of miles from this point of transfer when a carload of recruits was dumped upon the broad platform, and the superintendent scratched his head, and screwed up the corner of his mouth, and asked an assistant how in a hotter place than even Salt Lake valley the road could expect him to forward troops without delay "when the road took away the last car in the yard getting those Iowa boys out."

"There ain't nothin' left 'cept that old tourist that's been rustin' and kiln-dryin' up 'longside the shops since last winter," said the junior helplessly. "Shall we have her out?"

"Guess you'll have to," was the answer. "It's that or nothin';" and the boss turned on his heel and slammed the office door behind him. "Ten to one," said, he, "there'll be a kick comin' when the boys see what they've got to ride in, an' I'll let Jim take the kick."

The kick had come, as predicted, but availed nothing. A score of lusty young patriots were the performers, but, being destined for service in the regulars, they had neither senator nor state official to "wire" to in wrathful protest, as was usual on such occasions. The superintendent would have thought twice before ever suggesting that car as a component part of the train bearing the volunteers from Nebraska, Colorado or Iowa, so recently shipped over the road. "They could have made it hot for the management," said he. But these fellows, these waifs, were from no state or place in particular. They hadn't even an officer with them, but were hurrying on to their destination under command of a veteran gunner, "loaned" for the purpose at the recruiting station. He had done his best for his men. Ruefully they looked through the dust-covered interior and inspected the muddy trucks and brake gear. "She wheezes like she had bronchitis," said the corporal, "and the inside's a cross between a henroop and coal bin. You ain't going to run that old rookery for a car, are you?"

"Best we've got," was the curt reply. Yet the yardman shook his head as he heard the squeak of the rusty journals, and ordered his men to pack in fresh waste and "touch 'em up somehow." Any man who had spent a week about a railway could have prophesied "hot boxes" before that coach had run more than its own length, but it wouldn't do for an employe to say so. The corporal looked appealingly at his fellow passengers of the Rio Grande train. There were dozens of them stretching their legs and strolling about the platform, after getting their hand-luggage transferred and seats secured but there was no one in position or authority to interpose. None seemed to feel an interest.

"Get your rations and plunder aboard," he ordered, turning suddenly to his party, and, loading up with blankets, overcoats, haversacks and canteens, the recruits speedily took possession of their new quarters, forced open the jammed windows to let out the imprisoned and overheated air, piled their boxes of hard bread and stacks of tinned meat at the ends and their scant soldier goods and chattels in the rude sections, then tumbled out again upon the platform to enjoy, while yet there was time, the freedom of the outer air, despite the torrid heat of the midday sunshine.

In knots of three or four they sauntered about, their hands deep in their empty pockets, their boyish eyes curiously studying the signs and posters, or wistfully peering through the screened doors at the temptations of the bar and lunch counter or the shaded windows of the dining-room, where luckier fellow-passengers were taking their fill of the good cheer afforded. Two of the number, dressed like the rest in blue flannel shirts, with trousers of lighter blue and heavier make, fanning their heated faces with their drab, broad-brimmed campaign hats, swung off the rear end of the objectionable car, and with a quick glance about them, started briskly down the track to where the "diner" and certain sleepers of the Southern Pacific were being shunted about.

"Come back here, you fellers!" shouted the corporal, catching sight of the pair. "You don't know how soon this here train may start. Come back, I say," he added, emphatically, as the two, looking first into each other's eyes, seemed to hesitate. Then, with sullen, downcast face, the nearer turned and slowly obeyed. The other, a bright, merry youngster, whose teeth gleamed as he laughed his reply, still stood in his tracks.

"We're only going to the dining-car, corporal," he shouted. "That's going with us, so we can't be left."

"You've got no business in the dining car, Mellen; that's not for your sort, or mine, for that matter," was the corporal's ultimatum. And with a grin still expanding his broad mouth, the recruit addressed as Mellen came reluctantly sauntering in the trail of his comrade, who had submitted in silence and yet not without a shrug of protest. It was to the latter the corporal spoke when the two had rejoined their associates.

"You've got sense enough to know you're not wanted at that diner, Murray, whether Mellen has or not. That's no place for empty pockets. What took you there?"

"Wanted a drink, and you said: 'Keep away from the bar-room,'" answered Murray, briefly, his gray eyes glancing about from man to man in the group, resting for just a second on the form and features of one who stood a little apart, a youth of 21 years, probably. "It was Foster's treat," he added, and that remark transferred the attention of the party at the instant to the youngster on the outskirts.

He had been leaning with folded arms against a lamp post, looking somewhat wearily up the platform to where, in pairs or little groups, the passengers were strolling, men and women both, seeking relief from the constraint and stiffness of the long ride by rail. He had an interesting—even a handsome—face, and his figure was well knit, well proportioned. His eyes were a dark, soft brown, with very long, curving lashes, his nose straight, his mouth finely curved soft and sensitive. His throat was full, round, and at the base very white and fair, as the unfastened and flapping shirt collar now enabled one to see. His hands, too, were soft and white, showing that at least one of the 20 came not from the ranks of the toilers. His shoes were of finer make than those of his comrades, and the handkerchief so loosely knotted at the opening of the coarse blue shirt was of handsome and costly silk. He had been paying scant attention to his surroundings, and was absorbed, evidently, in his watch on the tourists up the platform when recalled to himself by the consciousness that all eyes were upon him.

"What's this about your treatin', Foster?" asked the corporal.

For a week he had felt sure the boy had money, and not a little. Nothing would have persuaded him to borrow a cent of Foster or anybody else, but others, and plenty of them, had no such scruples.

The young recruit turned slowly. He seemed reluctant to quit his scrutiny of his fellow passengers. The abrupt tone and manner of the accustomed regular, too, jarred upon him. It might be the corporal's prerogative so to address his charges, but this one didn't like it, and meant to show that he didn't. His money at least was his own, and he could do with it as he liked. The answer did not come until the question had been twice asked. Then in words as brief and manner as blunt he said:

"Why shouldn't I?"

Corporal Connelly stood a second or two without venturing a word, looking steadfastly at the young soldier, whose attitude was unchanged and whose eyes were again fixed on the distant group, as though in weary disdain of those about him. Then Connelly took half a dozen quick, springy steps that landed him close to the unmoved recruit.

"You've two things to learn among two thousand, Foster," said he, in low, firm voice. "One is to keep your money, and the other, your temper. I spoke for your own good principally, but if you've been lading out money to be spent in liquor, I say stop it. There's to be no whisky in that car."

"Nobody wants it less than I do," said Foster, wearily. "Why didn't you keep it out of the other?"

"Because I never knew till it was gone. How much money did you give Murray—and why?" and Connelly's eyes were looking straight into those of Foster as he spoke, compelling respect for sturdy manhood.

"A dollar, I believe," was the languid answer, "and because he asked it." And again the lad's gaze wandered off along the platform.

The switch engine was busily at work making up the train, and brakemen were signaling up and down the line. The dining car, followed by some ponderous sleepers, came gliding slowly along the rails and brought up with a bump and jar against the buffers of the old tourists' ark assigned the recruits. Somewhere up at the thronged station a bell began to jangle, followed by the shout of "All aboard!"

"Tumble in, you men," ordered Connelly, and at the moment there came a general movement of the crowd in their direction. The passengers of the sleepers were hurrying to their assigned places, some with flushed faces and expostulation. They thought their cars should have come to them.

"It's because our train is so very long," explained the brakeman to some ladies he was assisting up the steps. "We've twice as many cars as usual. Yours is the next car, ma'am; the one behind the diner."

The recruit, Foster, had started, but slowly, when in obedience to the corporal's order his fellows began to move. He was still looking, half in search, half in expectation, towards the main entrance of the station building. But the instant he became aware of the movement in his direction on part of the passengers, he pushed ahead past several of the party; he even half shoved aside one of their number who had just grasped the hand rail of the car, then sprang lightly past him and disappeared within the doorway. There, half-hidden by the gloom of the interior, he stood well back from the grimy windows, yet peering intently through the swiftly passing crowd.

Suddenly he stooped, recoiled, and seated himself in the opposite section while his comrades came filing rapidly in, and at the moment a tall young

"WHAT'S THAT ABOUT YOUR TREATIN', FOSTER?" ASKED THE CORPORAL.

officer in dark uniform, a man perhaps of 25, with a singularly handsome face and form, strode past the window, scrupulously acknowledged Connelly's salute, and then, glancing about, saw the heads and shoulders of a dozen soldiers at the windows.

"Why, what detachment is this, corporal?" he asked. "We brought no troops on our train."

"Recruits—the cavalry, sir," was the ready answer. "We came by way of Denver."

"Ah, yes; that explains it. Who's in command?" And the tall officer looked about him as though in search of kindred rank.

"We have no officer with us, sir," said Connelly, diplomatically. "I'm—in charge."

"You'll have to hurry, sir," spoke the brakeman at the moment. "Jump on the diner, if you like, and go through."

The officer took the hint and sprang to the steps. There he turned and faced the platform again just as the train began to move.

A little group, two ladies and a man of middle age, stood directly opposite him, closely scanning the train, and all of a sudden their faces beamed, their glances were directed, their hands waved towards him.

"Good-by! Good-by! Take good care of yourself! Wire from Sacramento!" were their cries, addressed apparently to his head, and turning quickly, he found himself confronting a young girl standing smilingly on the platform of the dining car, her tiny feet about on a level with his knees; yet he had hardly cast an upward glance, for her beaming, beautiful face was but a trifle higher than his own. In all his life he had never seen one so pretty.

Realizing that he stood between this fair traveler and the friends who were there to wish her godspeed; recognizing, too, with the swift intuition of his class, the possibility of establishing relations on his own account, the young soldier snatched off his new forage cap, briefly said: "I beg your pardon; take my place," and, swinging outward, transferred himself to the rear of the recruit car, thereby causing the corporal to recoil upon a grinning squad of embryo troopers who were shouting jocular farewell to the natives, and getting much in the way of train hands who were busy straightening out the bell cord.

Something seemed amiss with that portion of it which made part of the equipment of the old tourists' car. It was either wedged in the narrow orifice above the door or caught among the rings of the pendants from above, for it resisted every jerk, whereat the brakeman set his teeth and said improper things. It would have grieved the management to hear this faithful employe's denunciation of that particular item of their rolling stock.

"Get out of the way here, boys, and let's see what's the matter with this dinged bell cord," he concluded, elbowing his way through the swarm about the door. Once fairly within, he threw a quick glance along the aisle. The left sections of the car were deserted. Out of almost every window on the right side poked a head and pair of blue flannel shoulders.

Only one man of the party seemed to have no further interest in what was going on outside. With one hand still grasping the edge of the upright partition between two sections near the forward end, and the other just letting go, apparently, of the bell cord, the tall, slender, well-built young soldier, with dark-brown eyes and softly curling lashes, was lowering himself into the aisle. The brakeman proceeded to rebuke him on the spot.

"Look here, young feller. You'll have to keep your hands off that bell cord. Here I've been cussin' things for keeps, thinkin' it was knotted or caught. It was just you had hold of it. Don't you know better'n that? Ain't you ever traveled before?"

The man addressed was stowing something away inside the breast of his shirt. He did it with almost ostentatious deliberation, quietly eying the brakeman before replying. Then, slowly readjusting the knot of a fine black silk necktie, so that its broad, dapping ends spread over the coarser material of the garment, he slowly looked the justly exasperated brakeman over from head to foot and as slowly and placidly answered:

"Not more than about half around the world. As for your bell cord, it was knotted; it caught in that ring. I saw that some one was tugging and trying to get it loose, so I swung up there and straightened it. Just what you'd have done under the circumstances, I fancy."

The brakeman turned redder under the ruddy brown of his sun-tanned skin. This was no raw "rookie" after all. In his own vernacular, as afterwards expressed to the conductor, "I seen I was up ag'in' the real t'ing dis time," but it was hard to admit it at the moment. Vexation had to have a vent. The bell cord no longer served. The supposed meddler had proved a help. Something or somebody had to be the victim of the honest brakeman's spleen, so, somewhat unluckily, as events determined, he took it out on the company and that decrepit car, now buzzing along with much complaint of axle and of bearing.

"Damn this old shake-down, anyhow!" said he. "The company ought to know 'nough not to have such things lyin' round loose. Some night it'll fall to pieces and kill folks." And with this implied apology for his aspersions of Recruit Foster, the brakeman bustled away.

But what he said was heard by more than one, and remembered when perhaps he would have wished it forgotten. The delay at Ogden was supplemented by a long halt before the setting of that blazing sun, necessitated by the firing of the waste in the boxes of those long-neglected trucks. Far back as the rearmost sleeper the sickening smell of burning, oil-steeped packing drove feminine occupants to their satchels in search of scent-bottles, and the men to such comfort as could be found in flasks of bulkier make.

In the heart of the desert, with dust and desolation spreading far on every hand, the long train had stopped to douse those foul-smelling fires, and, while train-hands pried off the red-hot caps and dumped buckets of water into the blazing cavities, changing malodorous smoke to dense clouds of equally unsavory steam, and the recruits in the afflicted car found consolation in "joshing" the hard-sweating, hard-swearing workers, the young officer who had boarded the second sleeper at Ogden, with half a dozen bipeds in dusters or frazzled shirt-sleeves, had become involved in a complication on the shadier side of the train.

Somewhere into the sage-brush a jack-rabbit had darted and was now in hiding. With a dozen eager heads poked from the northward windows and stretching arms and index fingers guiding them in their inglorious hunt, the lieutenant and his few associates were stalking the first four-footed object sighted from the train since the crossing of the bald divide.

Within the heated cars, with flushed faces and plying palm-leaf fans, a few of the women passengers were languidly gazing from the windows. At the center window of the second sleeper, without a palm-leaf and looking serene and unperturbed, sat the young girl whose lovely face had so excited Mr. Stuyvesant's deep admiration. Thrice since leaving Ogden, on one pretext or other, had he passed her section and stolen such a look as could be given without obvious staring. Immediately in rear of the seat she occupied was an austere maiden of middle age, one of the passengers who had come on by the Union Pacific from Omaha. Directly opposite sat two men whom Stuyvesant had held in but scant esteem up to the time they left the valley of Salt Lake. Now, because their sections stood over against hers, his manner relaxed with his mood. Circumstances had brought the elderly maid and himself to the same table on two occasions in the dining-car, but he had hitherto felt no desire to press the acquaintance.

This afternoon he minded him of a new book he had in his bag, for literature, he judged, might be her hobby, and had engaged her in conversation, of which his share was meant to impress the tiny, translucent ear that nestled in the dark-brown coils and waves of the pretty head in front of him.

When, however, it became patent that his companion desired to form her own impressions of the pages uninfluenced by his well-delivered comments, Mr. Stuyvesant had bethought him of the semisomnolent occupants of the opposite section, and some cabalistic signs he ventured with a little silver cup summoned them in pleased surprise to the water-cooler at the rear end, where he regaled them with a good story and the best of V. O. P. Scotch, and accepted their lavish bid to sit with them awhile.

From this coign of vantage he had studied her sweet, serious, oval face as she sat placidly reading a little volume in her lap, only once in awhile raising a pair of very dark, very beautiful, very heavily browed and lashed brown eyes for brief survey of the forbidding landscape; then, with never an instant's peep at him, dropping their gaze again upon the book.

Not once in the long, hot afternoon had she vouchsafed him the minimum of a show of interest, curiosity, or even consciousness of his presence. Even the train made its second stop on account of the fires, and Bre'r Rabbit his luckless break into the long monotony of the declining day.

Tentative spikes, cloths and empty flasks having failed to find him, the beaters had essayed a skirmish line, and with instant result. Like a meteoric puff of gray and white, to a chorus of yells and the accompaniment of a volley of missiles, Jack shot into space from behind his shelter and darted zigzagging through the brush. A whizzing spike, a chance shot that nearly grazed his nose, so dazzled his brainlet that the terrified creature doubled on his trail and came bounding back towards the train.

Close to the track-side ran a narrow ditch. In this ditch at the instant crouched the tall lieutenant. Into this ditch leaped Bunny, and the next second had whizzed past the stooping form and bored straight into a little wooden drain. There some unseen, unlooked-for object blocked him.

Desperately the hind-legs kicked and tore in the effort to force the passage, and with a shout of triumph the tall soldier swooped upon the prize, seized the struggling legs, swung the wretched creature aloft, and for the first time in six mortal hours met full in his own the gaze of the deep, beautiful brown eyes he had so striven to attract, and they were half pleading, half commanding for Bunny. The next instant, uninjured, but leaping madly for life, Bre'r Rabbit was streaking eastward out of harm's way, a liberated victim whose first huge leap dwarfed much of its length to the impetus of Stuyvesant's long, lean, sinewy arm.

This time when he looked up and raised his cap, and stood there with his blonde hair blowing down over the broad white forehead, although the soft curves of the ripe red lips at the window above him changed not, there was something in the dark-brown eyes that seemed to say: "Thank you!"

Yet when he would have met those eyes again that evening, when "Last call for dinner in the dining-car" was sounding through the train, he could not. Neither were they among those that peered from between parted curtains in the dim light of the sleeper, many in fright, all in anxiety, when somewhere in the dead of the summer night long after all occupants of the rearmost cars were wrapped in slumber, the long train bumped to a sudden jarring standstill, and up ahead there arose sound of rush, of excitement and alarm.

CHAPTER II.

It was just after sunset, when, for the second time, the hot boxes of the recruit car had been treated to liberal libations from the water-tank, and the belated train again moved on.

Dinner had been ready in the dining-car a full hour, but so long as the sickening smell of burning waste arose from the trucks immediately in front very few of the passengers seemed capable of eating. The car, as a consequence, was crowded towards eight o'clock, and the steward and waiters were busy men.

The evening air, drifting in through open windows, was cooler than it had been during the day, but still held enough of the noontide caloric to make fans a comfort, and Mr. Stuyvesant, dining at a "four-la-hand" table well to the front, and attempting to hold his own in a somewhat desultory talk with his fellow-men, found himself paying far more attention to the lovely face of the girl across the aisle than to the viands set before him.

She was seated facing the front, and opposite the austere maiden previously mentioned. Conversation had already begun, and now Stuyvesant was able to see that, beautiful in feature as was her face in repose, its beauty was far enhanced when animated and smiling.

When to well-nigh perfect external features there is added the charm of faultlessly even and snowy teeth and a smile that illumines the entire face, shining in the eyes as it plays about the pretty, sensitive mouth, a young woman is fully equipped for conquest.

Stuyvesant gazed in fascination uncontrollable. He envied the prim, precise creature who sat unbending, severe, and, even while keeping up a semblance of interest in the conversation, seemed to feel it a duty to display disapprobation of such youthful charms.

No woman is so assured that beauty is only skin deep as she who has none of it. Her manner, therefore, had been decidedly stiff, and from that had imperceptibly advanced to condescension but when the steward presently appeared with a siphon of iced seltzer, and, bowing deferentially, said he hoped everything was to Miss Ray's liking and added that it seemed a long time since they had seen the captain and supposed he must be a colonel now, the thin eyebrows of the tall maiden were uplifted into little arches that paralleled the furrows of her brow as she inquired:

"Miss Ray? from Fort Leavenworth?"

The answer was a smiling nod of assent as the younger lady buried her lovely, dark face in the flowers set before her by assiduous waiter, and Stuyvesant felt sure she was trying to control an inclination to laugh.

"Well, you must excuse me if I have been a little slow," said the elder in evident perturbation. "You see—we meet such queer people traveling sometimes. Don't you find it so?"

The dark face was dimpling now with suppressed merriment.

"Yes occasionally," was the smiling answer.

"But then, being the daughter of an army officer," pursued the other, hurriedly, "you have to travel a great deal. I suppose you really—have no home?" she essayed in the half-hopeful tone to be expected of one who considered that a being so endowed by nature must suffer some compensatory discomforts.

"Yes and no," answered Miss Ray, urbanely. "In one sense we army girls have no home. In another, we have homes everywhere."

It is a reproach in the eyes of certain severe moralists that a fellow-being should be so obviously content with his or her lot. The elder woman seemed to feel it a duty to acquaint this beaming creature with the manifest deficiency in her moral make-up.

"Yes, but I should think most anyone would rather have a real home, a place where they weren't bounden to anybody, no matter if it was humbly." (She called it "humbly," and associated it in mind with the words of Payne's immortal song.) "Now, when I went to see Col. Ray about our society, he told me he had to break up everything, going to Cuba, but he didn't mention about your going west."

"Father was a little low in his mind that day," said Miss Ray, a shade of sadness passing over her face. "Both my brothers are in the service, and one is barely 17."

"Out at service!" interrupted the other. "You don't mean—"

"No," was the laughing answer, and in Miss Ray's enjoyment of the situation her eyes came perilously near seeking those of Mr. Stuyvesant, which she well knew were fixed upon her. "I mean that both are in the army."

"Well—I thought not—still—I didn't know. It's all rather new to me, this dealin' with soldiers, but I suppose I'll get to know all about it after a spell. Our society's getting much encouraged."

"Red Cross?" queried Miss Ray, with uplifted brows and evident interest, yet a suspicion of incredulity.

"Well, same thing, only we don't propose to levy contributions right and left like they do. I am vice president of the Society of Patriotic Daughters of America, you know. I thought perhaps your father might have told you. And our association is self-sustaining, at least it will be as soon as we are formally recognized by the government. You know the Red Cross hasn't any real standing, whereas our folks expect the president to issue the order right away, making us part of the regular hospital brigade. Now, your father was very encouraging, though some officers we talked to were too stuck up to be decent. When I called on Gen. Drayton he just as much as up and told me we'd only be in the way."

Just here, it must be owned, Miss Ray found it necessary to dive under the table for a handkerchief which she had not dropped.

Mr. Stuyvesant, ignoring the teachings of his childhood and gazing over the rim of his coffee cup, observed that she was with difficulty concealing her merriment. Then, all of a sudden, her face, that had been so full of radiance, became suddenly clouded by concern and distress. The door at the head of the car had swung open and remained so, despite the roar and racket of the wheels